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Review

W(h)ither Feminism? Joy Christiansen and E-J Major



by Charissa N. Terranova

June 2007

Exploitation of the female body is the shared theme of work by [Joy Christiansen](#) and [E-J Major](#) recently shown at [Photographs Do Not Bend Gallery](#) in Dallas.

It is a topic that emerges in the heyday of a feminist reawakening or, more precisely, rehashing. Bookended on the coasts by two retrospectives, [Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution](#) at MOCA, Los Angeles, and at the [Global Feminisms](#) Brooklyn Museum, New York, the work of Texas-based Christiansen and London-based Major offers a view from the heartland on the status of Woman today. Taken in total, the work of these two artists seems to be saying that her boobs, butt, and tired eyes are the fuel for spectacular entertainment.



Joy Christiansen
The Dialogue
2003
Mixed media

Both artists have opted for working through the theme of woman-as-victim rather than the dumber-than-dumb false empowerment offered up by the rich and vapid icons of [Paris Hilton](#) and [Britney Spears](#). Christiansen and Major have trod well-worn territory here. At the same time, though, their interrogation of the feminine body as a vessel for marketing exploits is welcome. Like [Vanessa Beecroft](#) and [Cindy](#)

[Sherman](#), respective forebears of Christiansen and Major, they give the "mediatized" girl-body a serious treatment that comes closer to consciousness-raising than the beer-spattered, buxom-baring, wet T-shirts of [Girls Gone Wild](#). The work at [Photographs Do Not Bend](#) turns the feminine mystique inside-out as a means of intelligent provocation.

Christiansen's two rooms of interactive installations, *Domestic Encounters*, reveal a deft hand at craft. Objects are props for Christiansen's narrative: the existentially weighty tale of life with an eating disorder. Text on the wall reading, "my mother suffered from anorexia for thirty years," tells us that it is a psychic weight borne from one generation to the next.

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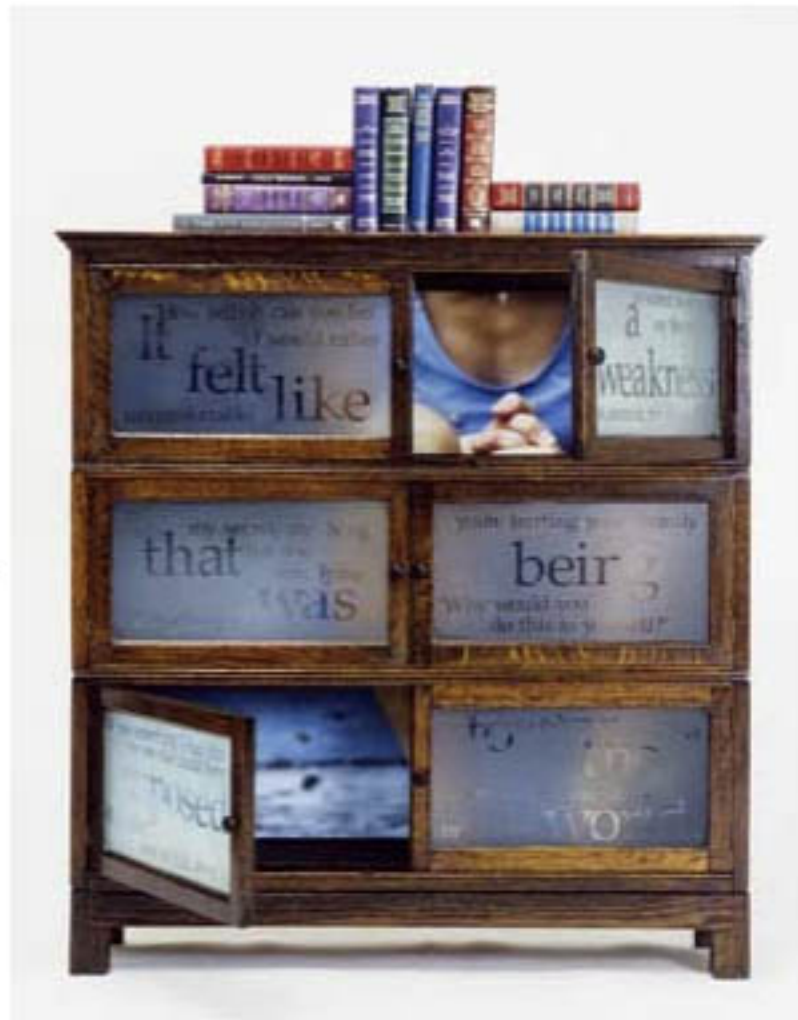
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One room is devoted to Christiansen's *Family Gathering*, an ersatz living room replete with cushy armchairs and couch, homey pillows on a banquette, heirloom dishes in a curio cabinet, a bookshelf and a wall of family portraits. *Hidden Secrets* is installed in an adjacent space to similar effect, replicating a study with desk and chair and cabinets. Similar to [Proust's](#) memory-invoking madeleine, the couch, chairs, cabinets and curios are bearers of Christiansen's past.

Coupling language and carpentry, Christiansen has transformed dumb objects into poetic vehicles. Sewn on the cushions are messages from the past: thoughts and words from her and other family members. Christiansen has injected static images of people — family members, and naked and barely clothed pictures of herself — by way of photographic transfer. Open the books on top of the cabinet to find carefully embedded photographs and messages. Kneel down to look inside the cabinet and find pictures of the artist, naked and distorted. Open the drawers to find evidence of the artist's obsessive compulsion. There is writing, writing and writing inside, and it is all about Christiansen and her troubled and worn psyche, the problems she has faced as a victim of anorexia nervosa.



Joy Christiansen
Bare
2005
Mixed media

The effect of *Family Gathering* is more tedious than harrowing. Using her well-honed skills of making and imagination, the artist has gone to great lengths to tell us of the misery of being a victim of her family and, as one circuitously gathers by way of the photo-transfer technique, mass media at large. On first blush, the installation reads like a mea culpa of the privileged world. The setting is a bourgeois living room and the exploitation is that of a girl with too much — food beckoning in the overstuffed refrigerator, images of reed-thin models on TV and in magazines, and above all else time. The artist devoted a lot of time to this project that reads ultimately as an exploitation not so much of Woman by the mass media as of the navel, that is, Christiansen's gazing at her own.

Less numbing are the photographs included in the adjacent installation *Hidden Secrets*. *Hidden Secrets #2* is a photograph of the artist coiled up as if in utero, but instead of in a uterus, she is squished beautifully into a shelf or (in *Hidden Secrets #4*) into a cabinet with an open door. In these photographs, the artist has chosen to abstain from the previous onslaught of verbiage, and to better effect. Her body is allowed to convey the quiet solemn woes of being a misfit in a world of idealized and proportional fittings. In place of the earlier graphorrhea, there is the subtlety of curvaceous beauty and a body crouched in space.



E-J Major
1985/tried hard
2004-2006
C-print

The 12 portraits of Major's *Marie Claire R.I.P.* effectively set in relief the exploitation at work in an article published by the fashion magazine [Marie-Claire](#). The portraits are based on the magazine's self-righteous muckraking as it relates the story of a heroin addict's deterioration. The images show Major in the guise of the addict in decline over a 14-year period.

We see the artist's face grow wizened, sallow and chapped over time, along with period transformations of clothing from 1983 to 1997. The photographic evolution of tired eyes, splotchy skin and ever-thinning hair works wonderfully as a series. At the same time, each photo stands

powerfully as a single image. Her raccoon-eyes and pink mottled skin in 1989/ hear rain set off a figure-ground play — a dynamism evident in distinct fashion in each portrait. The work is vigorously interpretative in that she translates Marie-Claire's exploitative narrative into images of herself, as if to say, "Your flippant manipulation is an imposition on me!" Though the work replays Cindy Sherman's film still photographs, it does so according to the artist's individual stance — the subject position of a young female artist in the new millennium.

Intentional or not, the work by these two young artists at Photographs Do Not Bend Gallery reads as "feminist." Though the form of this feminism is slightly more novel than the message it makes, the work collectively intones a mantra still necessary in a politically impoverished time where the girl-on-girl love of *Girls Gone Wild* is deemed a form of authentic empowerment and evidence of gender equity.

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Images courtesy Photographs Do Not Bend Gallery